

The Practice of Joy Before Death

I.

Six months ago, Osric watched a pigeon die on his window. Crushed against the glass, it dropped, from full speed to complete still. Its feathers maintained a flutter from the surrounding breeze, but its eyes were empty and cold. The precise moment of transformation was impossible to pinpoint. While it's true that one can obfuscate anything if in a particularly skeptical mood, Osric was truly struck by just how uncertain he was about the whole affair. It was until it wasn't, and that didn't sit well with Osric. Not at all.

Ever since then, he's been unable to sleep but able to dream. He's nightly seen a series of manifestations—each appearing quite ordinary despite the palpable dread they've instilled. A bridge rusted. Bouquets wilted in front of a florist. Verandas eaten by moths; table umbrellas frayed on all sides. A squirrel crushed—alongside other animals. More and more, these images would pronounce themselves, asserting their right to exist in his mind. At a certain point, he couldn't ignore their calls. They started as unremarkable backgrounds or irrelevant objects; but after weeks of development, they'd become the sum total of each dream.

From the dark of his restless dreams, he awoke. 2:16 AM—dawn was still a ways off. The air was still. The ceiling fan was broken and had been since last September. He knew he should fix it. Awash with sweat, his bed an ocean, his eyes burned, and he was conscious of every personal sensation. He stumbled to the bathroom, hesitating at first to light it. He

stared at himself,

“Are you having trouble sleeping, too?”

But his other half did not answer him. Only gave the same question, echoing the same sentiment without actually feeling it.

“Have I waited too long?” He asked but once more received his question in reply.

He turned on the lights, ears hit by the electric hum. The silence of the apartment was filled briefly. Osric washed his face in the sink. He brushed his teeth but didn't shower. He thought about it, staring at the curtain; but he couldn't pull it. He couldn't let himself be naked. He just couldn't do it. He listened to the water fall down his sink and swim through pipes, further and further down and out of his building into the greater municipal system. He darkened the room and, like that, silence. He stood in that place and heard mumblings in the shadows. Nothing discernible, just the race of dust moats, the settling of the room and the spinning of atoms right near his ear. Yet, despite all his faith in the empirical, he still heard voices, ones he couldn't pinpoint, their origin in the dark nebula that surrounded him.

He stared at the windowsill. No matter how much time has passed, he could still see it there. He could still hear its deathmarch. His eyes couldn't catch up to his mind. It wasn't there. It couldn't be there. Yet it was there, before him: dead and dying. He felt his chest tighten. His throat locked. He was holding on to air he didn't have, refusing to take in any from outside.

His body rejected self-preservation. The room turned an even darker dark, so intense he could feel it wrap around his whole being, blinding him entirely.

Then it hit him. A great heat. He could see. The sun, or so it seemed to be, was a huge cherry in an aching sky. It beamed down with a heat overwhelming, one that soaked through the skin and exhausted bone and muscle. He felt it. He felt everything. He was screaming. He knew he was screaming, but he couldn't hear it. He felt it. He tore through every chord. He gave all he had to give and gave beyond. A cacophony of grief and desire was swirling and threatening to tear him apart.

Eyes open, vision blurred, he turned about in a daze. Looking into the pale blue light, it swarmed his field of view, rendering it pure white. It was painful, but that pain grounded him, reminded him who and where he was. His muscles twitched, and oppressive fatigue overtook his entirety. There was a ringing in his ear that gave way to ragged, harsh breaths erupting from his throat. Involuntary spasms—sounding like death throes—as he tried to compose. Restored, he brought himself to his feet and looked once more in the mirror. A monster. Pitiful, small, vacant; unsaturated eyes, dry, red and half-hearted. He hadn't immolated, hadn't left in a blaze amid an awestruck crowd, hadn't torn apart the world with his hands. Everything was the same. Exactly as it was a thousand years ago; exactly as it will be a thousand years hence.

II.

On his way to work, the scent of sick leaves filled the air. Barren trees, save for the staunch conifers. Lining the sidewalks was the decay gradient. Some yellow, some red, differing stages of the same disease, brown being the final point, the departure, like a star reaching its Chandrasekhar limit. There was a shabbily dressed man in a torn navy blue shirt and brown cargo pants that were brimming with stains and signs of life. His eyes a piercing yellow, he coughed into the sky, a deep, ringing cough, phlegm drowning him; even in this temperate weather, he was sweating, enduring what many would consider a great challenge, that being his mere day-to-day. A bus stop with an elderly couple holding hands. They didn't look at one another—just straight ahead. No words were spoken. Like statues in a forgotten garden. A store condemned, another a property unrented, sandwiched in between an empty barber shop. As he observed each of these seemingly disparate circumstances, he couldn't shake that he felt connected to all of them and that each must be connected to the other.

He sat in his cubicle and listened as coworkers bantered back and forth about upcoming vacations, world events and office politics. Some of them were old heads, having spent decades working under the view of these white walls and cold fluorescent lights. Others were newbies, fresh out of college; math majors, sociology, economics—they all ended up here. Most don't stay. Frankly, nobody could imagine staying; yet invariably some do. Someone has to stay. Like a remote village engaging in ritual sacrifice—it's done for the benefit of everyone around them. That's what this place always

felt like to Osric: the result of choosing to save the many with yourself as payment. It's those who make such a choice that are of particular interest to Osric. How does someone who never wanted and never intended to stay end up doing just that?

Osric was himself a stayer. His fifth year. His job was supposedly related to sales, though he never completely understood how and never bothered to ask. All he knew was each day, he'd be given a new set of spreadsheets to pursue. Tracking metrics, searching for inconsistencies and signs of inefficiency and writing the same reports day after day.

He felt a tap on the shoulder followed by a muffled voice. "Osric?"

Without turning around, Osric responded, "Antonio. What is it?"

Attempting to sound professional, the man deepened his voice and answered, "Hey, I called you a couple of times. You daydreaming on the clock, Osric?" The man said with a slight smile.

"No. What I'm doing requires my full attention." A lie clear to both of them.

"Right, right. Well, sorry to kill your flow, but I need to check on that budget report. Is it almost done? Osric could feel the man's eyes peering into him.

"Almost. A few more items require investigation. Inconsistencies in expenses, and there were a few items unaccounted for in the drafted budget. Adjustment and reapproval is needed."

Osric noticed his left leg thumping. He was sure the man noticed. He

tried his best to stifle it, and slightly it was, but there was still a steady beat, a rhythm, like he was playing bass drum while soldiers marched on either side.

“That sucks, but honestly it doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of things. We needed to reschedule this quarter’s meeting anyway, so just get it to me by the end of the day.”

There was an overpowering quiet as Osric waited for him to leave. Suddenly, the man’s shoulders relaxed somewhat, his professionalism dissipating bit-by-bit, as if he were undressing, until he placed his arms and chin on the top of Osric’s cubicle.

“Anything new with you?” the man asked.

“Nothing noteworthy.” Osric quickly replied.

A few seconds of silence passed interrupted only by the click-clack of Osric’s keyboard.

“So, George is going to leave his wife, I hear.” He said suddenly, as if excited by the prospect of swapping gossip.

“That right?” Another quick reply.

“Yeah, fell for some college-aged barista. Everybody’s talking about it, but he doesn’t seem bothered about it at all. It’s like nothing’s happening.” There was a giddiness to his relaying of scandalous material, one that he appeared to try and implant into Osric.

“How about that.” Antonio’s efforts appeared to be in vain.

Another agonizing silence. “I gotta imagine he feels some kind of

guilt, right? I mean, how could you not? They've got 2 daughters."

"You may feel more than he can."

"I hope not. I like to think most people are good, but when you hear stories like that, it always strikes a nerve."

"I'm sure it does." Osric said, finally turning his head to face another.

"Give me a little more than that, Osric. What do you really think?"

Before him was a man with a clear vitality. His eyes were a soft blue; his skin soft and hair a lush brown. He always dressed immaculately. It was evident he put a lot of effort into his appearance before coming in each day. Osric had never seen any of his coworkers outside of work, but he assumed this one, Antonio, didn't spare any expense even on days off. Each nail was perfectly even, filed precisely, the color choices of his clothes and their respective patterns were complementary and well-considered. Osric always made it a point to observe Antonio's outfit each day and compare it to his own. Not necessarily in a value-judgment manner; but more in a matter-of-fact, empirical appraisal of how they differed and what that said about each of them as people. Today, blue slacks and a brown button-up. Most likely not tailored, probably straight off the rack, yet the fit was perfect, not too tight in the shoulders but just enough in the arms to accentuate their shape and length. Wasn't too long either. Perfect length hitting just below the waist, seated cleanly above a leather belt. On his feet were light brown socks and a pair of dark brown loafers. The lights of the office flew off the shoes, showcasing their polish.

"I guess I'm just not sure what to think." He looked down at the floor, a neutral face, muscles relaxed; perhaps he didn't anticipate saying that. Maybe he thought he was a different type of person.

With tangible urgency, as if sensing discomfort, Antonio said, "Anyway, you coming out with us tonight? We're doing Happy Hour."

"I would, but I have some things to take care of after work."

"Awesome. I'll come by to grab you before we head out."

"Alright." Osric knew the futility of arguing with someone like Antonio.

"Sharon'll be there. I think I'm gonna finally make a move." He added, a huge grin overcoming his face.

"Really?" Osric asked skeptically.

"Yeah! I'm gonna ask her out." he proudly proclaimed.

"Are you sure you should do that?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I?"

"What if it goes badly?" There was a certain earnestness in Osric's question. A genuine curiosity on his face.

"Then it blows up in my face, but I gotta shoot my shot. Can't worry too much about what comes next."

"Maybe."

He patted Osric on the back. "You worry too much. Relax a little."

Osric let out a cough upon being hit. "Could be," he said, composing himself, " Well, good luck."

“Thanks. I’ll catch you later.” He waved to Osric as he walked back to his cubicle.

One thing Osric noticed about Antonio today that he never had before was the bags under his eyes. He’d never had those before. But there they were, sinking deep into his face, seeming to want permanent residence. He still looked like himself, of course, but there was a difference. How strange that a man can appear so different with just a slight alteration. How strange that a man can change so quickly after being so consistent for so long. Sudden change. Permanent, temporary, one can never tell, but they always feel like forever. He felt as though he did something wrong and was filled with immediate regret. He didn’t have the words he wanted or needed, but he had that feeling, one that filled his entirety.

III.

A dingy bar. A neon sign semi-lit, letters missing, though one could still parse out the name: **THE BROKEN HORSE**. It had cheap wood cladding alongside ancient, desaturated brick; the windows were perpetually dirty. No matter how much one dusted or power-washed, it was muck baked in so deep as to become fixed. On the front, in bold Gothic typeface, was yellow text reading “Established 1956” and “We’ve seen it all!” A list of specials written on a street board. Pub pretzels and \$5 beer pitchers. A single light above the threshold.

“He makes me want to fucking scream.” One person uttered with a guttural attack.

“Did you hear what happened to Denise?” Another added, worry in her voice.

Osric fidgeted in his stool, one-half attentive, the other searching around the bar for something else. All around him were people with the same story. Each had their variation, of course, with its hues, shapes and characters; but with the same end prepared, the kind that landed them in a place like this on a weekday.

“Apparently, Derek’s been texting her constantly outside of work, and he’s been creeping on her so hard. When she told Wheeler, he didn’t do anything. They’re still in the same department, and H.R. isn’t doing shit about it.” Meryl spoke again with that same guttural attack.

“Between that situation and George, it’s like the men in our office have gone nuts. No offense, Antonio. Or Osric. You guys know what I mean.”

“Of course. I feel the same way, honestly. I was just talking to Osric earlier about that. Doesn’t make any sense, and it came out of nowhere. He always talked up his wife, so he’s the last dude I expected to do that.”

Osric realized his name had been mentioned twice, but he only caught bits and pieces of what was said. Something about George. He knew Antonio’s voice, but somebody else had mentioned him; he teetered on whether or not to ask for clarification, only to decide not to, thinking it better to let the conversation stream along. Trying to put a stop to a moving object only draws attention.

Brick walls and gray, plastic garbage cans. That summed up the place. Out-of-place, loosely connected paintings littered the brick and wood walls, those of mediocre landscapes and still lifes. One in particular showed a group of men sitting around a table locking eyes with one another, mouths closed, seemingly communicating solely through the eyes. Car license plates, a steering wheel and some bowling trophies also gave the place some flair. Clearly the work of a professional interior designer.

“Have you seen Derek do anything?” Everyone peered at Osric.

“No, I haven’t seen anything.”

“Yeah, Osric never leaves his desk. I don’t know if you’d even notice a fire unless it happened in your cubicle.”

“Yeah, probably.”

After a laugh, the rest of the group continued. Osric continued to listen only partially while the other half found itself in everything around him. He saw a woman sitting near the bar looking in his direction. But not in an innocuous way, in a manner that made it apparent she was staring at him. She was mouthing something—words, sounds, incantations? It was hard to tell, but she was trying to communicate. Something about her made him very uncomfortable. She wasn’t blinking, and her lips were curled into a smile that was neither friendly nor malicious—it betrayed no emotion beneath the surface nor on the external level. It was when he noticed in her hand a white feather that his heart fell into his stomach, crushing it, and making him wince. His eyes immediately darted away and began scanning

the walls when, suddenly, it was quiet. Osric noticed the mumbling of his coworkers stopped and looked to see them gone. Not only them, but the entire bar was empty, save for the woman at the bar. She hadn't disappeared, nor stopped smiling or silently chanting. It was completely silent—as if she weren't there. All he could hear was the soft hum of the lights surrounding him and the lights.

“Wh-what is . . .” is all he could stutter out. He knew speaking was pointless, but that was his body's natural reaction, to betray his countenance and show fear.

As such, he knew he had so many more words to say, so much he felt he couldn't see or think or hear, but all he could muster was that question addressed to nobody. He heard from the bathroom a call. His name. Softly, so low you could barely hear it; but in the disquiet and the chill, his senses heightened, he recognized it seemingly before he'd even heard it. He felt it glide across his skin, into his bone and muscles, until it manifested as sound. He stopped breathing, hoping to keep whatever was calling for knowing he could hear it; either that, or he hoped if he waited long enough, he'd pass out and everything would go back to normal. No matter how long he seemed to wait, or how much time passed, the voice continued, unperturbed, in its supple rhythm.

As if on a track, he was propelled toward the door. He kept watching the woman as he moved toward it, certain that she'd spring to attack given the opportunity. The whisper grew the nearer he drew, reaching a peak as

he stood before the threshold. Muffled by the door and distorted by the volume, it barely sounded like his name. It was a droning chant, echoing in the great chamber, cutting right to the core, the very core, of him and the world around him. It became the world. He was utterly transfixed. He wasn't watching the woman anymore. She didn't matter. She never did.

In that hazy sea, he then found himself and, with immense focus and trepidation, swung the door open, shaking its hinges so forcefully as to nearly tear them out. His eyes were closed, as he did not wish to see what awaited him; he'd rather be destroyed outright than catch its image for even a fraction of a second. But when he entered, the deafening howl ceased. It was a silence so overwhelming that it nearly collapsed his ears. So empty that it seemed full. So intoxicating, so powerful, that the room itself was rendered a vacuum.

He gingerly opened his eyes and saw a darkness that curdled his bones. Urinals cracked and coated in grime; a set of stalls, some without doors; sheetrock and tile were strewn about an equally fractured tile floor. That's when he saw it: his reflection in the long bathroom mirror. But it didn't feel like him. It looked like him, sure, but it felt like somebody else. It matched his mannerisms, his motor and facial movements, but only to about 99%. It had this barely perceptible artificiality, this subtle imperfection, like it were a recreation or performance. For some reason, one he could not intellectualize, the closer he got, the dizzier he felt. He began stumbling, throwing himself against the counter and, upon looking up, saw the

reflection of a smirk that should not exist.

“Welcome home.”

It spoke. Osric’s throat seized.

“Don’t panic. You’ve an awful habit of that.”

Osric composed himself enough to stammer out, “What are you?”

The figure leaned in and narrowed its eyes deep into Osric. “I love when they ask that question. What do you think?”

Osric immediately turned to leave the restroom, finding the door gone. His eyes went wide, all the blood drained from his face, his hands were shaking, reaching for a door handle that wasn’t there.

“It’s rude to leave in the middle of a conversation. Here I am, rather civil, and this is how you treat me? That’s disappointing, but not unexpected.”

“I don’t even know what I’m talking to.”

“Would you call yourself happy, Osric?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“An epistemological one in a sense. I’ve answered your question, now kindly answer mine.”

“I—I can’t.”

“Dull. I’ll need to categorize that as a ‘no.’ Let me ask another. Look closely at yourself. Can you see how weak you are?”

“Aren’t I just looking at you?”

“No, you can’t see me. You can’t see anything. Now, come closer.”

"I don't think I should."

"You don't have much reason not to at this point. You can't leave."

He did as instructed and drew closer to the mirror.

"Good. Very good. Listen to me carefully. Those people out there: they're not your friends. But I don't need to tell you that, right?"

"No, they aren't. They're just coworkers."

"Right. Just coworkers. At least to you. To them, you're something else."

"What?"

"Do you really think they invited you here because they like you?"

"I don't know."

"Can't you commit to a single thought, you stupid fuck? Let me spell it out for you: they felt bad for you. They've always felt bad for you. I could tell from the minute you started there."

"Wait, 'since I started?' How is that possible?"

"Hell, even I feel a little bad for you. I always have."

"Even if what you're saying about them is true, I don't care. I'm more concerned about your presence in my life. How long have you been skulking around my head?"

"Look at yourself. You drain everyone around you. That's all you do."

"I don't care."

"You've always thought you were a good liar."

"You don't know anything about me!" Osric found a feeling deep

inside, an anger, well to the surface and erupt through his throat. He'd never yelled like that before.

The figure began to move somehow closer through the mirror—as if walking up to a camera lens. “Listen, starting now, we can turn this whole thing around. I’m going to help you out. You know why? Because I’m a nice guy.”

“I—I don’t need your help, and I don’t—”

It put its left index finger up to its lips and let out a quiet and sustained shush.

“I can get you friends. I can get you respect. Hell, I may be able to get you laid for the first time in God knows how long—no guarantees on that, though. I’m not a miracle worker here. I have to work with the face I’m given.”

“Stay out of my fucking life! I don’t know what you are or what you’re capable of, but I won’t let you.”

The figure let a half-smile creep onto its face. “You forget yourself.”

It began to laugh and grow in size, infinitely so, until it filled the entire mirror. It seemed to fill the entire room, Osric could not focus on anything but its piercing brown eyes. They burnt their way into his and settled in the back of his skull. The familiar form became an unknowable shadow, with cartoonishly proportioned arms, legs and torso, all stretching from the maw of its dimension into his. Osric felt himself being pulled down, down, down, more down than he ever felt before, lower than he’d ever felt

before, with more force piling onto him each passing second, more than he'd ever felt before, until—

“Osric?”

It was Antonio. Osric turned from the mirror to find the lights back on, the muffled stir of chaos on the other side of the door, and his associate before him. He noticed once more the dark circles below his eyes. Somehow, they were even more noticeable than before. It was like he was seeing them for the first time.

“You were gone for a while.” Antonio looked very concerned, with confusion in his voice but also a desire to appear nonjudgmental and supportive.

“Yeah, I was. I’m not feeling well.”

“Will you need off tomorrow? I can help with that.”

“No. I’ll be in tomorrow. I just need rest.”

“You and me both. Okay, see you tomorrow.”

As Antonio started toward the door, Osric forced himself to ask, “How’d it go with Sharon?”

He stopped and gave a slight smile, “I struck out. Turns out you were right!”

Osric fiddled with the keypad on the outside of his apartment complex. In addition to the code, every tenant had to know just the right way to input it. There was a certain amount of pressure needed for each

number, a proper direction and angle from which to approach the button; any deviation from this precise sequence failed. To get in, one must demonstrate perfection every time. By now Osric was used to this, but it never ceased to irk him. No matter where he was, there was always an expectation.

Somehow, despite his restlessness from that night's events, he was able to gain access with only 2 attempts. He's had nights that required upwards of 5 or 6. He started on the long journey up to his apartment on the 12th floor. The elevator hadn't worked for some time, and while he could probably file some report against his landlord, that would require effort Osric just couldn't find within himself. He simply made the trek up and down each day begrudgingly, trying to see it as his daily exercise and taking solace in that.

At this door, he felt a chill overtake him. He did not want to go inside. On the ride here, he thought about the figure he had seen. It must have been some kind of hallucination, induced by stress or fatigue—or both. It's the only explanation that makes sense, as doors do not disappear and reflections do not speak nor morph. Even still, he was distressed, and no amount of rationalization could fully eliminate that feeling. He opened the door discreetly and peered into the darkness. Without stepping inside, he snuck his hand in and reached for the light switch. The fan sprang to life and began spinning. What initially could be mistaken for a beast or unknowable agent of darkness would be revealed to be a couch or standing

lamp. Just from one action, a foreign and hostile territory became an arrangement of bits and bobs that brought a semblance of comfort. How his mind could so quickly jump from one extreme to the next—from total danger to total safety—troubled Osric generally, but did so to an even greater degree at the moment.

“So, uh, any murderous demon lying in wait?” He asked wryly, though his expression betrayed him.

He cautiously stepped through the threshold, now fully committed, and shut the door. His immediate concern was the bathroom mirror. It was the only one in his house. He needed to see before he could do anything else. He held his breath and listened for anything, any indication of an invasive force, but heard nothing. At the bathroom door, he pressed his ear against it, again trying to hear his adversary before seeing it. Nothing. He took a deep breath, exhaled sharply and flung the door open, flicked the light switch, all while looking directly at the mirror so as not to be taken by surprise.

He once again saw his reflection, and for a moment, pure ice ran up and down his spine. He waited for it to speak, but it didn’t. He waited for it to move, but it didn’t. He moved his hand; it moved the very same way. He moved his head; it followed suit. He closed one eye; it mimicked perfectly. He moved closer and bent over the sink, peering deep into its eyes. They felt like his; they looked like his. Was this just his reflection—the same as it's always been? He waited. And waited. But nothing, no boogeyman

appeared, no daemon presenting, just his tired, timorous face. Without thinking, he began to thrash the mirror, obliterating it, first with fists and then with a hairbrush. As his fists flew against the wall, he knew in his mind that no good could come from this, that he was taking a step beyond rational, normal behavior and into the peculiar and potentially alienating. He did not choose to make that step—it was made for him, by some part of him, one foreign to him, one he could not access. He didn't know its name, yet it knew how to, in an instant, contort and twist his muscles in just the right motions to destroy a mirror that was not his, in an apartment he did not own, with a landlord who did not like him.

He thought, "I'm completely and totally fucked."

Back in the main room, he looked at the set of windows overlooking the city. He fixed his gaze on the windowsill—that windowsill—and felt colder than he had while walking home. Where it was, he saw a single feather.

Blood dripping from his hands onto the wood floor, he asked, "How long do you plan on staying here?"

IV.

Work was surprisingly uneventful. Osric was both relieved and disappointed. In some part of his mind, he expected his life had taken a more fanciful turn; he didn't necessarily want that, but something happening is more interesting than nothing. When he first arrived, he felt anxious and beelined to check the faculty bathroom mirror. Nothing. The

ridiculousness of his actions began to dawn on him—especially as last night’s outburst replayed in his mind. He was thankful nobody seemed to notice his recent peculiarities, so he performed them once to himself and decided then to set them aside, to reassert himself as a mundane pedestrian. Antonio found his way over to rant about anything he felt like—comic books, movies, their boss—Osric half-listened as he continued working, an arrangement both had gotten used to and found comfort in its repetition and lack of risk. However, one thing Osric was yet to get used to were the bags under Antonio’s eyes. They seemed to be getting darker and pushing deeper into his face.

“What happened to your hand?”

“Cut myself while cooking.”

“I take it you’re not a Michelin-grade chef, then?” He said, laughing.

“I probably wouldn’t make it, no.” Osric let out a small smirk, but nothing more.

In the parking lot, he saw a figure standing by a rundown car. It was an older Toyota Corolla, maybe 2005—maybe even older. As he drew closer, his eyes adjusted to the blinding sun as his hands shielded them, revealing it was Sharon. She had popped the hood and was looking inside. Osric was parked next to her, so once he arrived at his car, she noticed him.

“Hey, Osric.”

“What happened?”

“My car broke down. Just my luck, right? Now I have to wait even

longer to leave. God knows how much traffic I'm gonna hit."

"That's unfortunate."

"It's whatever. It's my own fault anyways. This car is beaten to hell, and I'm too stubborn—and poor—to get a new one! This is just a sign from the universe that I'm being dumb."

"Maybe. I don't know much about signs." He responded genuinely.

"Me neither. Who even is an expert, right?"

"Right."

"Anyway, have a good night."

"Is someone coming to help?"

"Yeah, no worries. I called someone. Thank you!"

"Okay."

Osric got in his car and looked at her again. She was back under the hood tinkering away. He didn't know if she was just trying to keep busy or was actually diagnosing something; he wouldn't be able to tell the difference in either case, so it didn't really matter. As he drove away, he looked in the rearview mirror until she and her car were out of view. He saw his own eyes looking at him. They were a cold brown—like chocolate ice cream—but slightly darker than usual. While it's normal for eye color to change subtly throughout the day, Osric didn't default to that assumption. They were his eyes, he thought—yes, most definitely—but at the same time maybe not? They didn't feel like eyes, though he knew they must be. I mean, whose would they be if not for him? He did not wish to summon the memory

of what happened last night. So, he played along—for a time. He wasn't even looking at the road anymore, just his chocolate ice cream eyes. They seemed so sweet he felt like he was going to throw up.

In his periphery, he noticed a telephone pole and slammed on the brakes as hard as he could. His body spasmed and his arms instinctively swung the wheel out of the way. He narrowly hit the pole head-on. He saw himself die in the brief moment he lost himself. He wasn't conscious as he swung the wheel, as he tensed his entire being: he was utterly vacant. He was hyperventilating; his tongue completely dry; his ears ringing—he hadn't felt like this in a long time—this alive. It wasn't welcome but not entirely unwelcome. In what felt like an eternity, he released his foot from the brake and turned back.

She was still there—waiting. She noticed his car pull back up beside her. She looked a bit confused, then returned her attention to the vehicle.

"Do you know what the problem is?"

"Uh, yeah, I think the battery is dead."

"Okay."

"I thought you left."

He retrieved a set of cables from his trunk as well as a charge box.

"Let's try this."

Osric took a moment to recall what exactly to do. It'd been a long time since he had to jumpstart a car. Which one went where?

"Do you know where this one goes?"

She laughed. "Yeah, right here."

Together, they got the car running after a few false starts and a slew of stutters.

"I'll give my friend a call. I don't think she left her apartment yet."

"Sure. See you tomorrow."

"Hold up a second."

She gave her friend a call and explained the situation. She suddenly let out a hearty laugh and told her friend to shut up. Why she needed to shut up, Osric didn't know, but there wasn't much desire to find out.

"Are you free right now? I know a good spot for coffee."

"Don't you want to avoid traffic?"

"Yeah, but I have to pay you back. Please?"

V.

A little cafe a few miles from the office, **MARY'S ROOM**. Its namesake is the owner's late daughter, used as a way to keep her spirit alive. They served all her favorite desserts, her favorite tea, everything Mary would want in her room given no constraints.

The sun was right behind her head, splaying across in like threads holding a puppet contemptuously.

"How was your day?"

"I can't complain." He said half-heartedly.

She called him out. "You can't or you won't?"

After a moment, he responded, "Both."

“Why’d you come back to help me?”

“I just felt like I should.” He knew his full reasoning could never be properly explained.

“‘Felt like you should,’ huh? I guess I understand that feeling. I don’t always know why I do what I do either.” She spoke earnestly while looking toward the floor.

“Oh?” Osric asked with genuine curiosity.

She bit her lip and, upon some consideration, said “Don’t tell anyone. I’m a bit embarrassed about it, but I sometimes sleepwalk. I’ll try to do my morning routine. Y’know, getting dressed, brushing my teeth; invariably, something wakes me up—usually me bumping into something or making a loud noise. I’ve been dealing with it for the last few years. I don’t know why it happens.”

“I see. That’s peculiar indeed.” He said curtly.

“Have you ever?” She leaned in, hopeful.

“No, I have trouble sleeping. I wake throughout the night.” He thought about lying.

“That must be tough on you.” She said sympathetically with a hint of disappointment.

“I can say the same for you.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever really spoken to you. This is the most I’ve ever heard you talk to someone actually. You’re usually so quiet.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m just surprised is all. You have a very nice voice. More people should hear it.” She seemed to mean what she said, but you can never be sure about anyone.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Antonio says you spend too much time thinking.” She said with a smile.

“He’s probably right.” Osric rubbed his face in slight embarrassment.

Without realizing, he let out, “He’s a good person.”

“I think you’re a good person, too. I hope you know that.” She was looking directly at and into him.

Osric felt this sudden urge to leave. “Thank you for the coffee. It’s getting late, so I’m going to head out. This was nice.”

“We should do it again sometime.” She said with urgency, trying to communicate her feelings before he could leave.

“Sure.” He said noncommittally.

Osric arrived at work the next day with an overburdening sense of dread. He felt something building, both inside himself and in the world around him. He walked with greater precision, checking corners and softening his steps. He wanted to stumble, not be stumbled. He arrived at his cubicle without incident. With enough time passing and his routine seemingly unperturbed, he gradually relaxed his posture and began to denigrate himself for his unfounded sensitivity. Then, it dawned on him:

what about the bathroom? A brick settled in his stomach. A bolt shot through his spine when he visualized himself standing before the mirror, standing before whatever that thing was. He still couldn't wrap his mind around what happened, and while it seemed ridiculous, totally impossible, he wouldn't feel completely invalidated without first checking.

He once again dawned the countenance of a spy, tiptoeing through this newly foreign space. He did not want to alert the invader—or was he the invader? Nonetheless, he stood before the door and took a deep breath. Let's say it is in there: what is it capable of? Could he face it? This uncertainty did nothing to comfort him, but the anxiety of not checking outweighed the fear of possible danger. With a swift motion, he thrust the door wide open and stepped inside.

The chattering of cheap office lights. The settling of the building. The muffled goings-on of the office just outside. That's all he could hear. Everything looked—normal. So normal that his fear immediately appeared misplaced. He dared not face the mirror when barreling in, so he slowly turned his attention to it and found, just like at his apartment, his reflection, staring back at him, no ill intent in sight. Osric let out a relieved sigh. He recalled when he was a kid that a goofy slasher film would be enough to keep him sleepless for weeks.

Leaving the bathroom, he walked back toward his cubicle when his eyes shot open in disbelief and his blood seemed to evaporate out of his body. He saw another him at his cubicle. It hadn't noticed him yet, so he

shot behind a nearby wall and looked on. Acid filled his throat as he saw Antonio walk in its direction. He knew he had to stop him, do something, but he couldn't move his legs.

"Hey, what's up, Osric? Feeling better?"

"Absolutely. I'm actually doing great today. I really appreciate you inviting me out the other night."

"Of course, anytime! We go out most every Friday, so you should come along again."

"For sure, that'd be great. By the way, I have new data for you, it's ready for processing."

"Perfect! I was just coming over here to check on that, so that makes my life a lot easier."

"Can I do anything else?"

"You got time for a chat?"

"Absolutely."

Osric watched in disbelief as Antonio and his double partook in an engaging conversation. He could tell by Antonio's body language, his bright smile. He nodded his head fervently to all the Double's points. He was laughing, laughing more than Osric had ever seen Antonio laugh. He couldn't make out any of the words—he couldn't hear anything, just a ringing, and his rapid, ragged breaths grew faster and faster.

This was him—but more, more him than he's ever been before. He could feel the depth of that person, whereas he couldn't feel even half of it

within himself. His legs grew weaker and weaker as he collapsed to the floor. He couldn't breathe. He was trying, gasping for any amount of oxygen to fill him, but none would take. As he forced himself to his feet, he noticed his double cast a glance at him and smile—not an over-the-top, malicious grin, more subtle and warm, a knowing mien. It was brief, so brief one could miss it, but Osric didn't. He saw it and he couldn't unsee it. He ran back into the bathroom, ripped open a stall, nearly tearing the door off its hinges, and proceeded to vomit. It was the kind of vomiting that was all pain, from the very bottom of his body, the very end of his small intestine redirected all its contents back through the mouth, emptying him, to the point that he felt no organs in his body, no thoughts in his mind, no teeth in his mouth—nothing. The abyss.

From behind him, "See what I can do for you?"

Osric dared not look back, too busy retching and heaving, and too afeared of what it might do to him.

The voice came closer. "You can't run from me forever, y'know. You do so much running—eventually, something's gonna catch you."

Enraged, Osric turned to thrash the figure, regardless of the consequences. He knew only one thing—that his rage could not be held, it must unfurl."

His fist connected with its face, but it did not move.

"Finally some balls grew, did they? Very good. You'll need those."

The figure turned around and walked out of the bathroom. Osric just

stared at his still-balled fist, noticing it shake and begin to bleed. He scratched through a layer of skin it seemed, with just that one punch, like he punched a brick wall. His hand hurt as well—a throbbing sensation, the blood pulsing violently in his hand. He didn't feel it initially, but shortly after it was overtly noticeable. He walked to the sink to put his hand in some cold water, as it was so hot, like it was on fire, and that's when he noticed his face—it was bruised. His cheek—the same cheek he had struck on the figure, the left—was blue and purple. He opened his mouth, stretching his jaw, and he let out a slight yelp, covering his mouth swiftly to muffle it. It felt like he got hit by a baseball bat. He spat into the sink—blood. He rinsed his mouth as best he could, soaked his hand until the pain settled somewhat and decided his only course of action now was to return to work.

As he left the bathroom, Osric bumped into Sharon.

"Are you okay!?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Yeah, yeah—I'm fine. I had a bad slip."

"A bad slip? Did you slip into an oncoming truck or something?"

"The sink."

"Don't you think you should go home?"

"I'm okay.."

He turned and headed back to his cubicle. The report he had been working on for Antonio was gone.

"What—where—where the fuck is it? I—I was going to hand it in after

lunch.” He thought.

“It has to be here somewhere. There’s no way I handed it in. It wasn’t done yet. I wouldn’t have done that.”

It wasn’t there. Antonio never mentioned it; Osric was too afraid to ask. He didn’t want to hear an answer he didn’t like.

He sat in his car and peered through the windshield at the twilight sky. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, turning his nails a bright white. It hurt, and while he didn’t want the pain, he didn’t flinch from it either. He stared once more into the rear-view mirror, adjusting it to focus squarely on himself. This time, it was him, he could feel it, on some deep intuitive level; but again, could he really be so sure? There’s a fine line between confidence and arrogance, and Osric never felt comfortable finding a healthy middle. He knew in no uncertain terms that it was waiting for him, if not in this car, then at home. He had no other options. There is nowhere to run from such a creature, and so he must face it.

VI.

At the threshold of his apartment, he felt immediately unwelcome. No matter how much money this place drained from him, regardless of the fact that he possessed a copy of the key, this was not his space. Osric never felt particularly attached to this place, sure, but this feeling was different; he’d never felt so alienated before, in the true sense of the word—alien. Inserting the blade, the lock yielded and he turned the knob then flung the door open without leaving the hallway. Darkness visible, pure and uncorrupted,

untouched by the light piercing in from outside. No matter how wide the door is, Osric thought, no light could touch this. Somehow, Osric wasn't afraid. He was on the ride here, but standing here, gazing into this strange realm, he felt at ease, like he was approaching destiny—the truth itself.

One foot in. Then the other. He shut the door behind him, knowing he'd have no use for the outside anymore. In the middle of his living room stood a shadow even darker than the darkness surrounding it. Osric could see its eyes, make out its form. He knew what it was, as I'm sure you do.

They stared at one another. Osric decided that, this time, he'd do things differently.

"So, I'm here."

"You are."

"Tell me, what are you? I need to know at least that much."

"A better question would be, 'What aren't you?' I'm more than I could describe to you, but also very limited at this current time. That's why I need you."

"What happened to that bravado from before? The superiority?"

"That was to get you here. I needed to break you down so I could build you up. We both know what we are to each other, and a truly superior being doesn't need to flaunt it."

"I'm not broken."

"I'd revise that. You are, but I wasn't the one that broke you. You were when I arrived, and my goal was to help you reach a new low. You've

stagnated, languished at rock bottom, so you needed to break through the bedrock and dig deeper than you thought possible.”

“But why? Why are you doing this?”

“Do I really need a reason? Osric, not everything in this world has a meaningful cause. You think it does, but it doesn’t. Everything has a cause, but no causes matter all that much.”

“Do you intend to kill me?”

“Yes, the you that stands before me. It needs to die so the true you can live. I’m that true you. Like I said, I can make you better, get you to achieve your dreams instead of languishing around your apartment. It’s pathetic and unbecoming of a man.”

“But I don’t want to die. Won’t I lose myself?”

“There isn’t anything worth preserving at the current moment. You’d be better off—everyone you know would be better off.”

“What the fuck do you know? You act like you know everything, but you don’t know a goddamn thing about me or my life.”

“I know you killed that bird.”

“What?”

“That bird you’ve been obsessing over. You killed it, and now you’re playing dumb, like you always do. Although I suppose it’s not really playing if you’re dumb to start.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t kill it. It killed itself.”

“Oh, so that’s what you think?”

“What I ‘think?’ That’s what happened.”

“The mind’s ability to rationalize—incredible stuff. No matter how many of you I meet, I’m always surprised.”

“You can’t mess with me. I know what I saw. Play your games with someone else. I wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“You wouldn’t, huh? Then why does death seem to follow you like your own lapdog?”

“You’re insane.”

“No, I’m crystal clear. You’re the one that’s in denial. Here, let me show you.”

He rushed to me and grabbed my head, bringing me face-to-face with the creature. Suddenly, I was overtaken by a light, one so blinding I thought it’d be permanent, until it dissipated, leaving me outside, in front of a dilapidated building.

“Where am I?”

But I knew where I was. Deep down, I knew, but I couldn’t admit it. I said it to silence the chill that ran down my spine once seeing it. As long as there was a chance, I had to pretend.

I entered and saw a place long since abandoned and uncared for. Graffiti lined the walls, parts of the wall had rotted away, as did the floor, stairs were broken, leaving some floors wholly unreachable through conventional means. Yes, I knew this place, and I walked through like I knew it, but I refused to admit it. In a small room on the third floor, I saw it. My younger

self, cooking on a butane stove. I had been homeless for a few months at this point. In a way, it was self-inflicted. I lost my job and just . . . gave up. Stopped looking for another, stopped paying rent, stopped caring. I was miserable, sure, but not enough to retrace my steps, and at a certain point, it'd seemed too late, that even if I did care, there was no going back.

It wasn't cinematic. Something scared me, a squirrel, maybe a bird, and I knocked over my cooking setup. The dried, dead building acted as prime kindling, igniting instantly. I tried to contain it, tried to stop it; but the more I struggled, the worse I made it. It engulfed the room, then the building in seconds; in that moment, I saw the light, and realized I didn't want to die. I ran out and counted my blessings, assured that I was safe. However, in my ignorance, I had assumed I was alone. I heard voices, young voices, coming from up on the second floor. I just stand there and watch, watch them burn. And I feel it. I feel everything. I see everything. Hands pressed against the windows, winding down slowly to the floor. The smoke, the flames, it should render them invisible; but they're not. I see everything. I knew I was responsible. I knew I'd be held accountable. I was scared. So, so scared. I just realized I wanted to live, and now I was going to die. So, I ran, and I ran, anywhere, far away, as far as I could get.

Before I knew it, I was back in my apartment, alone, in that wretched darkness. The creature was gone. No further probing, no ceaseless digging, just an emptiness. I could almost say I felt—lonely. Like I missed it. I was so, so cold, colder than I'd ever been, especially in that room; and I continued

to grow colder as my eyes began to doze. I felt myself collapsing; I didn't want to let myself—something told me if I did I'd be lost forever, so I struggled against it. I ran to the bathroom, threw myself in the sink to wake myself, then thrashed into the shower, desperate to stay awake.

I scrubbed myself raw, nearly drowning in the deluge; I fell out and smashed my head into the vanity. That really fucking hurt. Immediately I felt dizzy. I knew I was bleeding pretty hard, so I wrapped a towel around my head to stem the tide. I knew I had to go to the hospital, but did I deserve it? Did I deserve to run a second time? To get away? I stood in front of the mirror, adorned in my bloody miter, and saw myself for the first time. I saw the flames surrounding my entire body, and as I looked around, I saw the entire room ablaze; running through the threshold back into the living room, it too was engulfed. So, this was the truth, the one I'd been running from since the beginning. I'd never escaped the flames. They followed me, and have been following, and will continue to follow. It was burning. I was burning. It gnawed through my skin, into the muscle and stretched out the bone; my nerves boiling, my mind melting; this was how I was always meant to feel, how I was always meant to look. This was my countenance, like an immolating monk on a street corner. For the first time in my life, I felt—right. This was right. I was with them, those who burned and those who will burn, and I'll burn with them—forever—until I am ash below the deepest rock or serve a greater tree.

